

## hyphenated

third grade, i learned about the  
vietnam war. i learned about the american  
lives lost, the american  
blood spilt, the american  
debt detonated, and  
the collateral damage. i learned i was a “hyphenated  
american,” an “asian-  
american,” a “vietnamese-  
american” and that the  
hyphen split my identity in  
two, and that the second my father stepped over the  
line between immigration and desertion, i was  
neither.

i bleached my mother’s  
tongue with ignorance and shame, until the  
language of my ancestors felt  
foreign on my tongue; i poured  
gasoline on her áo dài and arranged its  
ashes into a  
cemetery where my grandfather’s  
sanity laid amidst piles of shrapnel; i manifested  
dollhouse patriotism to fit under your  
porcelain palms and let myself be pressed  
six feet below mountains of fear and shame.

my history lies buried under collapsed  
villages adorned with columns of  
smoke, drowned in the  
tears of boys too young to  
understand but old enough to fight, and  
suffocated with the screams of families torn  
by gunshots. the chopping blades of helicopters  
hovered mere feet above teeth  
clammed shut over lips and swollen eyes  
huddled under dry banana leaves on barren  
farmland, the fingers of foreign soldiers wrapped  
around wrists of young girls with  
tear tracked cheeks, it  
tore my heritage in half.

my grandparents’ tongue is that of  
resilience. it’s the sound of farmers  
lost everything to the blazing fires and steel

bullets, got back on their knees, and started  
again. i am the product of the fusion of two  
countries, whose hands once wrapped  
around the other's throat but now  
intertwine fingers, and i'm still learning to  
reclaim my heritage. yet, my colonizers  
still look at me like my skin turned my  
safety into a commodity and rip through the  
flesh of my relatives like bullets.

*is this what it means to live the american dream?*